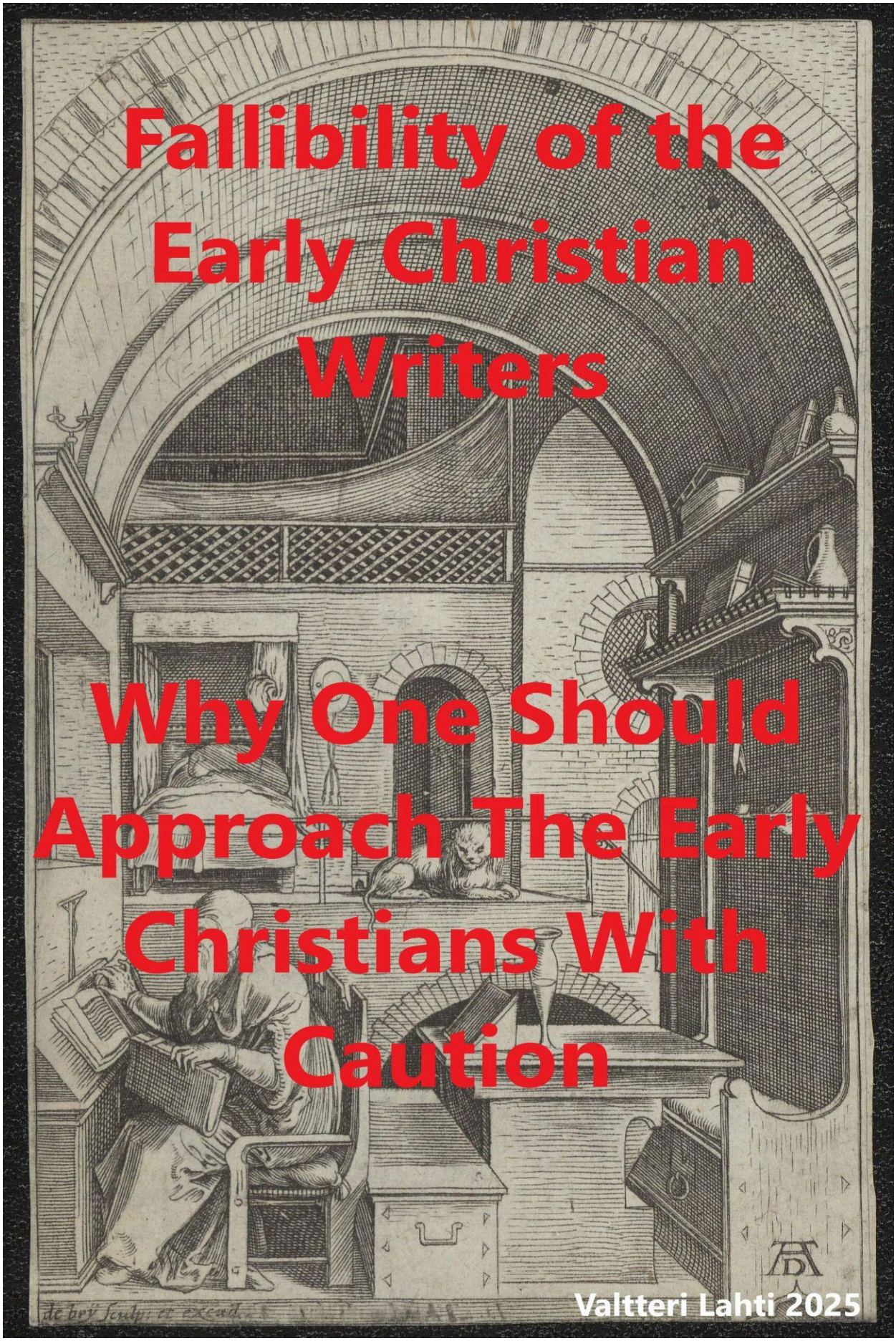
Fallibility of the Early Christian Writers



Why One Should Approach The Early Christians With Caution

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Introduction

2 Timothy 3:16-17
16 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:
17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

Today, it is quite common to see people referencing the "early church fathers," particularly in discussions related to Eastern and Oriental Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and high-church Protestantism. However, much of this reliance on their writings is often rooted in mistaken assumptions about the extent to which we can trust their views. While there is much to learn from the past—especially regarding the early Christological controversies—their opinions alone should not serve as the foundation for our theological positions.

This short ebook seeks to explore the potential dangers of placing too much weight on the writings of the early church writers when formulating doctrine. While these historical texts may sometimes give insights into the theological debates, relying on them can lead to significant doctrinal problems. Instead, we should remember that our only infallible authority which can never err on any issue is the Bible.

Chapter 1: Can The “Apostolic Fathers” be wrong?

The term “Apostolic Fathers” is commonly used in modern discussions to describe a group of early Christians who wrote during the first centuries of Christianity, including writers such as Polycarp, Hermes, Clement of Rome, Pseudo-Barnabas, Ignatius and Papias. These individuals are often said to have had personal contact with the apostles or to have lived close to their time. As a result, many people regard the writings of the Apostolic Fathers as especially trustworthy, reasoning that anyone who had such a direct connection to the apostles themselves would be unlikely to deviate from sound doctrine. However, it is important to note that even within the Bible itself, there are numerous examples of individuals who knew the apostles personally but still fell into doctrinal error. This serves as a reminder that proximity to the apostles, while significant, is not an absolute guarantee of doctrinal accuracy.

Examples of doctrinal error within the 1st-century churches include several significant issues that arose, as recorded in the New Testament epistles. A major such example is the Galatian error, which involved the belief that Christians could achieve justification through adherence to the law of Moses, an idea explicitly refuted by Paul in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 3:1-3). Another instance of doctrinal trouble is sectarianism, where divisions emerged within the church over which leaders to

follow, such as Paul, Apollos, or Cephas, an issue Paul addresses in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 3). Additionally, there was the rejection of a literal understanding of the resurrection of the dead, a heresy mentioned in 1 Timothy (1 Timothy 1:18-20). Finally, some claimed that Jesus did not have a physical body, a doctrinal error refuted in 1 John, where the apostle emphasizes that denying Jesus came in the flesh is a sign of the spirit of antichrist (1 John 4:3). These examples show the doctrinal challenges that arose even during the formative years of the Christian faith.

Now, if churches and individuals which knew Paul and the apostles when they were alive could experience this much doctrinal error, how much more prone could individuals after Paul be prone to error? This isn't to say that there was an immediate falling away of truth the moment the apostles died, but we should be cautious with extra biblical writings, which are entirely fallible.

In fact, these writings appear to contradict themselves at times and even contain some rather absurd claims. A significant example of this is the evolution of church polity. In the earliest writings, there seems to be no distinction between the roles of elder and bishop, suggesting an independent congregational polity. However, slightly later writings, such as those of Ignatius (108-140 ad), introduce a clear distinction between the two offices, marking the transition toward an episcopal polity. Early texts like the Didache (circa 80-100 AD) and Clement's first epistle (around 96 AD) both mention only two offices in each church:

Didache 1, Chapter 15. Bishops and Deacons; Christian Reproof

*Therefore, appoint for yourselves **bishops and deacons** worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money*

First Epistle of Clement:

*And thus preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first fruits [of their labours], having first proved them by the Spirit, **to be bishops and deacons** of those who should afterwards believe. Nor was this any new thing, since indeed many ages before it was written concerning bishops and deacons. For thus says the Scripture in a certain place, I will appoint their bishops in righteousness, and their deacons in faith.*

However, later authors such as Ignatius of Antioch seem to have a different kind of church polity, where a new episcopal model has arisen:

See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as you would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. (Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Smyrnaeans)

This shows that even within the very first centuries of Christianity, we see contradictions between the early Christian writers. However, other writings such as Hermas and Pseudo-Barnabas often show even crazier teachings. For example, Pseudo-Barnabas claimed that the Old Testament food

regulations were only allegorical, and not literal food regulations, as Chapter 10 of the Epistle of Barnabas reads:

Now, wherefore did Moses say, You shall not eat the swine, nor the eagle, nor the hawk, nor the raven, nor any fish which is not possessed of scales? He embraced three doctrines in his mind [in doing so]. Moreover, the Lord says to them in Deuteronomy, And I will establish my ordinances among this people. Is there then not a command of God they should not eat [these things]? ***There is, but Moses spoke with a spiritual reference****. For this reason he named the swine,* ***as much as to say****, You shall not join yourself to men who resemble swine. For when they live in pleasure, they forget their Lord; but when they come to want, they acknowledge the Lord. And [in like manner] the swine, when it has eaten, does not recognize its master; but when hungry it cries out, and on receiving food is quiet again. Neither shall you eat, says he the eagle, nor the hawk, nor the kite, nor the raven. You shall not join yourself, he means, to such men as know not how to procure food for themselves by labour and sweat, but seize on that of others in their iniquity, and although wearing an aspect of simplicity, are on the watch to plunder others. So these birds, while they sit idle, inquire how they may devour the flesh of others, proving themselves pests [to all] by their wickedness. And you shall not eat, he says, the lamprey, or the polypus, or the cuttlefish.* ***He means, You shall not join yourself or be like to such men as are ungodly to the end, and are condemned to death****. In like manner as those fishes, above accursed, float in the deep, not swimming [on the surface] like the rest, but make their abode in the mud which lies at the bottom. Moreover, You shall not, he says, eat the hare.* ***Wherefore? You shall not be a corrupter of boys, nor like such****. Because the hare multiplies, year by year,*

the places of its conception; for as many years as it lives so many it has. Moreover, You shall not eat the hyena. ***He means, You shall not be an adulterer, nor a corrupter, nor be like to them that are such****. Wherefore? Because that animal annually changes its sex, and is at one time male, and at another female. Moreover, he has rightly detested the weasel.* ***For he means, You shall not be like to those whom we hear of as committing wickedness with the mouth, on account of their uncleanness; nor shall you be joined to those impure women who commit iniquity with the mouth****. For this animal conceives by the mouth. Moses then issued three doctrines concerning meats with a spiritual significance; but they received them according to fleshly desire, as if he had merely spoken of [literal] meats.*

According to Barnabas, the Mosaic restriction on eating the meat of a pig, in his interpretation, was not meant to be taken literally but rather as an allegory. He claimed it symbolized the need to avoid fellowshipping with those who live unrighteously. Similarly, he suggested that the prohibition against eating certain kinds of fish was also an allegory, carrying the same message about avoiding unrighteous individuals. However, this interpretation is clearly not the intended meaning of the Mosaic Law as presented in the Bible. Yet, despite the clear inaccuracy of this interpretation, it was written by a Christian author around 120 AD. Does this early date somehow make the view more credible simply because it was held close to the apostolic era? This is precisely the problem with the type of thinking that equates the age of a belief with its trustworthiness. Just as we today are subject to our own biases, cultural influences, and personal flaws, so too were

Christians living 1900 years ago. The early date of a viewpoint does not inherently make it more reliable or authoritative.

Similar weird beliefs were held by another early Christian writer Hermas (140 ad), who claimed that if someone backslides into sin, they have only one more chance to obey God until God will no longer forgive them no matter what:

And therefore I say to you, that if any one is tempted by the devil, and sins after that great and holy calling in which the Lord has called His people to everlasting life, he has opportunity to repent but once. But if he should sin frequently after this, and then repent, to such a man his repentance will be of no avail; for with difficulty will he live. And I said, Sir, I feel that life has come back to me in listening attentively to these commandments; for I know that I shall be saved, if in future I sin no more. And he said, You will be saved, you and all who keep these commandments. (Shepherd of Hermas, 140 ad)

In addition to being obviously a false gospel, as salvation is not by works, it is noteworthy that even those who teach salvation by works would rarely go as far as to say that backsliding can only be forgiven once. This extreme stance, found in the writings of Hermas, presents a large problem. Hermas claims to have received a visitation from an angel who conveyed this teaching of a works-based salvation and limited forgiveness. However, the Bible clearly instructs us to reject any gospel, regardless of the claimed source, if it deviates from the true message of salvation by grace through faith. In Galatians 1:8, the apostle Paul explicitly states that even if an angel from heaven were to preach a different gospel, it should be rejected:

Galatians 1:8

8 But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.

Now, if it is this easy for Christians to be early this close to the apostolic-era, yet still err doctrinally, could this not also happen in the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries?

It is also to be noted that these theologians themselves did not want themselves to be viewed without caution, as they write:

I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were apostles; I am but a condemned man: they were free, while I am, even until now, a servant. But when I suffer, I shall be the freed-man of Jesus, and shall rise again emancipated in Him. And now, being a prisoner, I learn not to desire anything worldly or vain. (Ignatius, letter to the Romans)

For neither I, nor any other such one, can come up to the wisdom of the blessed and glorified Paul. (Polycarp Epistle To The Philippians)

Chapter 2: The Early Christians Contradict Each Other

It is very common for early Christians to contradict each other on multiple issues. For example, on the topic of infant baptism, the practice was strongly rejected by the 2nd century writer Tertullian, who wrote the following:

And so, according to the circumstances and disposition, and even age, of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children For why is it necessary—if (baptism itself) is not so necessary 8730 —that the sponsors likewise should be thrust into danger? Who both themselves, by reason of mortality, may fail to fulfil their promises, and may be disappointed by the development of an evil disposition, in those for whom they stood? The Lord does indeed say, "Forbid them not to come unto me." 8731 Let them "come," then, while they are growing up; let them "come" while they are learning, while they are learning whither to come; 8732 let them become Christians 8733 when they have become able to know Christ. On Baptism (Tertullian)

However, it was later demanded by the bishop of Carthage, Cyprian in the mid 3rd century:

But in respect of the case of the infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day, we all thought very differently in our council. For in this course which you thought was to be taken, no one agreed; but we all rather judge that the mercy and grace of God is not to be refused to any one born of man. For as the Lord says in His Gospel, The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them, Luke 4:56 as far as we Can, We must strive that, if possible, no soul be lost. For what is wanting to

him who has once been formed in the womb by the hand of God? To us, indeed, and to our eyes, according to the worldly course of days, they who are born appear to receive an increase. But whatever things are made by God, are completed by the majesty and work of God their Maker. (Cyprian of Carthage, Epistle 58)

Yet even later on, Gregory Naziansus in the 4th century says that children must be able to understand the meaning of baptism to be able to be baptized, as he writes in his orations:

in respect of others I give my advice to wait till the end of the third year, or a little more or less, when they may be able to listen and to answer something about the Sacrament; that, even though they do not perfectly understand it, yet at any rate they may know the outlines; and then to sanctify them in soul and body with the great sacrament of our consecration

Another area of contradiction within early Christian thought is the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary. This teaching, which holds that Mary remained a virgin for her entire life, was not universally accepted by early Christian writers. For instance, Tertullian, in his work On the Flesh of Christ, written before his conversion to Montanism, explicitly rejected this doctrine. He stated:

She who bare (really) bare; and although she was a virgin when she conceived, she was a wife when she brought forth her son. (On the Flesh of Christ)

However, other authors such as Jerome (4th century) strongly advocated for the perpetual virginity of Mary:

You say that Mary did not remain a virgin. As for myself, I claim that Joseph himself was a virgin, through Mary, so that a virgin Son might be born of a virginal wedlock (Against Helvidius)

(as you see, Jerome went so far as to affirm the perpetual virginity of Joseph)

Another major example of disagreement is unconditional election. Augustine in the 400s taught that God unconditionally elects some people to be saved, as he writes:

For what is it that the apostle says, As He has chosen us in Himself before the foundation of the world? Ephesians 1:4 And assuredly, if this were said because God foreknew that they would believe, not because He Himself would make them believers, the Son is speaking against such a foreknowledge as that when He says, You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you; when God should rather have foreknown this very thing, that they themselves would have chosen Him, so that they might deserve to be chosen by Him. Therefore they were elected before the foundation of the world with that predestination in which God foreknew what He Himself would do; but they were elected out of the world with that calling whereby God fulfilled that which He predestinated. (On the Predestination of the Saints, book I)

Augustine misunderstands the verse in John to refer to Jesus choosing the apostles for salvation, instead of it clearly referring to him choosing them as apostles. However other early Christians condemned this kind of thinking as a Gnostic heresy:

Clement of Alexandria in the 2nd century wrote that the Basilidians (Egyptian Gnostics) taught that humans cannot

believe without being elected to believe, he rejects their thinking as he argues that it denies responsibility:

Basilides' followers further say that faith and election are both particular to individual dispositions, and consequently, that faith on a world scale in every being follows from an election which lies beyond the world; further, they say that the gift of faith is proportionate to the hope of each individual. 11 (1) In that case, faith is no longer the right action of a free choice, a natural superiority; the person without faith is not responsible and will not meet his just consequences; the person with faith is not responsible; the whole essential difference between faith and unfaith could not be a matter of praise or blame if you look at it rightly, being a foreordaining natural necessity determined by the universal power. We are like lifeless puppets controlled by natural forces. It is a predetermining necessity which forces willingness34 and the lack of it. (Stromateis Books I-III, translated by John Fegurson, 164)

John Chrysostom (347 – 407) also stated that the Manichaean Gnostics use John 6:44 wrongly to attack free will to believe:

Ver. 44. "No man can come unto Me, except the Father which hath sent Me draw Him." The Manichaeans spring upon these words, saying, "that nothing lies in our own power"; yet the expression showeth that we are masters of our will. "For if a man cometh to Him," saith some one, "what need is there of drawing?" But the words do not take away our free will, but show that we greatly need assistance. And He implieth not an unwilling [1287] comer, but one enjoying much succor. Then He showeth also the

manner in which He draweth; for that men may not, again, form any material idea of God, He addeth, (Homilies on John)

These examples illustrate that early Christian beliefs were not always uniform, especially regarding certain theological positions. These debates demonstrate that there was significant theological diversity in the early Church. This challenges the common claim that all early Christians held unanimous beliefs on key doctrinal issues, and suggests that historical theology was more complex and varied than often portrayed in popular apologetics.

Chapter 3: Irenaeus' mention of Apostolic tradition

Among the first places in the early church, where "Apostolic tradition" is referenced is in Irenaeus, where he also argues that by Apostolic tradition Jesus did not die until he was a very old man:

Now, that the first stage of early life embraces thirty years, and that this extends onwards to the fortieth year, every one will admit; but from the ***fortieth and fiftieth year*** *a man begins to decline towards old age,* ***which our Lord possessed*** *while He still fulfilled the office of a Teacher, even as the Gospel and all the elders testify; those who were conversant in Asia with John, the disciple of the Lord, [affirming] that John conveyed to them that information. (Against Heresies, book 2)*

Irenaeus also later writes:

But, besides this, those very Jews who then disputed with the Lord Jesus Christ have most clearly indicated the same thing. For when the Lord said to them, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad," they answered Him, "Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast Thou seen Abraham?" Now, such language is fittingly applied to one ***who has already passed the age of forty****, without having as yet reached his fiftieth year, yet is not far from this latter period. But to one who is only thirty years old it would unquestionably be said, "Thou art not yet forty years old." For those who wished to convict Him of falsehood would certainly not extend the number of His years far beyond the age which they saw He had attained; but they mentioned a period near His real age, whether they had truly ascertained this out of the entry in the public register, or simply made a conjecture from what they observed that He was above forty years old, and that He certainly was not one of only thirty years of age. For it is altogether unreasonable to suppose that they were mistaken by twenty years, when they wished to prove Him younger than the times of Abraham. For what they saw, that they also expressed; and He whom they beheld was not a mere phantasm, but an actual being of flesh and blood. He did not then want much of being fifty years old; and, in accordance with that fact, they said to Him, "Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast Thou seen Abraham?" He did not therefore preach only for one year, nor did He suffer in the twelfth month of the year. (Against Heresies, book 2)*

However, the Bible mentions that Jesus ministered around age 30 in Luke 3:23, which reads:

23 And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, which was the son of Heli,

This serves as an important example of how even early Christian writings are capable of making mistakes even in simple areas such as this. This highlights the fallibility of early Christian traditions and interpretations, reminding us that not everything accepted in the early Church is without potential error or influence from the cultural or philosophical perspectives of the time.

Chapter 4: Can We Learn From History?

It would be a mistake to suggest that we cannot learn anything from history. However, what must be avoided is granting mere opinions undue authority, rather than evaluating them based on the strength of their arguments. For example, we can learn a great deal from the early theological controversies surrounding the Trinity, Christology, and similar issues. The early Christians, despite sometimes making theological errors, often stood courageously for what they believed to be true doctrine. One such example is found in the words of Athanasius, a 4th-century early Christian writer, during the Arian controversy when Arianism briefly gained widespread influence. Athanasius famously declared: *“If the world is against the truth, then I am against the world”*. This statement embodies his unwavering defense of the doctrine of the Trinity, which is absolutely central to Christianity. Athanasius and others who defended the true understanding of the Trinity displayed remarkable courage, and their efforts should be admired. Studying these early theological disputes—such as those surrounding Nestorianism, Apollinarianism, Monophysitism,

and Monothelitism—can deepen our understanding and appreciation of Biblical doctrines. For instance, Nestorianism was justly condemned because it improperly divided the person of Christ into two distinct subjects. According to Nestorianism, the man Jesus could not be identified as the divine Son of God, but was merely another person closely indwelt by God the Son, just like every Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This view contradicts the biblical teaching that Jesus is one person, not two, fully divine and fully human: *And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory. (1 Timothy 3:16).*

Similarly, Apollinarianism and Monothelitism which both claimed that Jesus did not have a full human soul were also justly rejected, as the Bible declares that Jesus was fully human:

Hebrews 2:17-18

17 Wherefore <u>in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren</u>, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.

18 For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.

This same verse also condemns Monophysitism, which claims that Jesus was not one person in two natures, but one person in one nature, which was like divinity and humanity mixed into a soup. This also denies Jesus' full humanity.

Learning about these theological debates also remains relevant today, as many of these controversies continue to persist. For example, John MacArthur has made statements approaching Nestorianism, such as his 1987 claim, “It’s heretical to call the blood of Jesus Christ the blood of God,” which contradicts Acts 20:28. Similarly, Steven Anderson promotes Monophysite-like views by asserting that Jesus' DNA is not identical to human DNA but is somehow mixed with divinity. In addition, the ongoing debates about the nature of the Trinity remain contentious. Jehovah’s Witnesses, for instance, deny the deity of Christ, relying on their corrupt “New World Translation.” Oneness Pentecostals, on the other hand, deny the distinctions between the persons of the Trinity, suggesting that they are merely modes of one person. This view falters when confronted with passages where Jesus addresses the Father using the word "you," which would be impossible if they were truly one person—after all, one person cannot refer to themselves as "you." Both of these views are heresy, and Christians need to be able to refute such doctrines which attack the triune nature of God.

Thus, despite the fallibility of the early Christians, it is still possible to learn from church history. Yet, we must remember that scripture is our only infallible source of truth.